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Research on the Application of CLT in Hungarian Language Education for Chinese Universities

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Abstract: This study investigates the application of communicative language teaching (CLT) in Hungarian language education for Chinese universities, with a case study of Tianjin Foreign Studies University. Using a qualitative research method, 25 semi-structured interviews were conducted with Hungarian majors at different academic levels. The research framework is based on Nunan's five features of CLT, focusing on interaction, authentic materials, learning awareness, personal expression, and language use outside the classroom. The findings reveal both the benefits and challenges of implementing CLT in a non-native environment. While interactive and authentic learning strategies show promise, issues such as limited classroom communication, outdated textbooks, and insufficient attention to learning processes hinder effectiveness.

Keywords: Communicative language teaching; Hungarian language; Foreign language education; Classroom interaction; Language transfer

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1. Introduction

Communicative language teaching (CLT) is among the most influential trends in modern language education, with its primary objective being the development of learners' communicative competence [1]. Rather than constituting a fixed set of classroom techniques, CLT is typically regarded as a broad teaching approach that prioritizes interaction and meaningful communication over mere grammatical accuracy. It emphasizes the use of the target language in authentic, real-life contexts. Over time, the goals of language education have shifted to reflect changing societal needs. In recent years, with the steady development of China–Hungary relations, Hungarian has been offered as a compulsory or elective course in 13 universities across China [2]. In contrast to traditional language teaching, which focuses on grammatical form, contemporary language learners increasingly aim to acquire effective communicative skills to meet the expectations of modern society and the labor market.

2. Research topic and methods

This research focuses on the application of CLT in Hungarian as a Foreign Language (abbreviated in Hungarian as *Magyar mint idegen nyelv*, *MID*) in China. MID refers to the teaching and learning of Hungarian by non-native speakers in non-Hungarian-speaking environments.

The study takes Hungarian instruction in Tianjin Foreign Studies University (TFSU) as a case study and adopts a qualitative research approach, using semi-structured interviews with 25 Hungarian majors from Chinese universities. The majority of participants were students and graduates from TFSU. Specifically, 20 interviewees were from Tianjin, including 5 second-year undergraduates and 15 graduates, of whom 6 were master's students. All had experience studying part-time in Hungary, providing exposure to the target-language environment. For cross-validation, 4 additional students from Beijing and 1 from Xi'an were also interviewed. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 26 and represented diverse gender identities. Their Hungarian proficiency levels varied, ranging from A2 to C1.

The questions in the interview outline focus on the current state of Hungarian language teaching and are centered around the core features of CLT. They are derived from David Nunan's (1991) theoretical model [3], which categorizes the key features of CLT as follows:

(1) An emphasis on learning to communicate through interaction in the target language.
(2) The introduction of authentic texts into the learning situation.
(3) The provision of opportunities for learners to focus, not only on language but also on the learning process itself.
(4) An enhancement of the learner's own personal experiences as important contributing elements to classroom learning.
(5) An attempt to link classroom language learning with language activities outside the classroom.

Based on these five dimensions, the interview questions were formulated to address interaction in the target language, the use of authentic corpora, consideration of the learning process, the expression of students' self-experience, and language activation outside the classroom.

3. The development of CLT

3.1. Theoretical foundations of CLT

CLT emerged as a dominant language teaching approach in the latter half of the 20th century, shifting focus from rote memorization and grammar drills to using language as a tool for real communication. Wilkins laid its conceptual foundation by connecting linguistic theory with practical teaching, while Littlewood detailed its pedagogical implications [4].

Building on Chomsky's linguistic competence [5], Hymes introduced communicative competence, highlighting the ability to use language appropriately in social contexts, bridging the gap between grammatical knowledge and real-life language use. Later, Canale and Swain expanded this model by adding sociolinguistic, strategic, and discourse competences [6]. Van Ek further added socio-cultural and social competences, making the model comprehensive and influential worldwide [7].

3.2. Principles and characteristics of CLT

CLT emphasizes the development of all skills, treating the four language skills in an integrated manner in authentic spoken language situations. In CLT, the learner is at the center, and the curriculum and teaching

materials are developed based on his or her needs and demands. The learner is active, conscious, and independent, responsible for his/her own learning. The teacher appears as a helper, advisor, and model in the language learning process. The teacher provides a motivating and stimulus-rich environment and tries to arouse the desire to learn with colorful original documents. Repetitive exercises are replaced by interactive games, role-playing, simulations, and problem-solving tasks. Students often work in pairs or small groups. The teacher's task is to organize these activities [8]. Errors are considered a natural part of language learning and are well tolerated. Teaching pronunciation takes a back seat in CLT, because the aim is not to acquire the correct pronunciation of the target language [9].

4. The application of CLT in Hungarian teaching in Chinese universities

This study takes Hungarian language teaching at TFSU as a case study and, therefore, focuses on the application of CLT in this university. With the approval of the Ministry of Education of China, TFSU established the Hungarian major in March 2017. There are currently two Hungarian teachers in this major, both of whom graduated from the Hungarian major of Beijing Foreign Studies University and the Hungarian studies master's degree of Eötvös Loránd University in Hungary, and another native Hungarian teacher. The Hungarian Department launched its first four-year training program in the 2017/2018 academic year. As of June 2025, a total of 57 students are studying or have graduated from the Hungarian Department of TFSU. Hungarian students adopt the 3+1 education model, that is, they will exchange and study for one year in a Hungarian university in the third year.

In this section, I will present the results of the current situation analysis. The interview outline is related to the current situation of the application of CLT in Hungarian language teaching in TFSU, and from the perspective of the five dimensions: Target language-based interaction, the use of authentic corpora, consideration of the learning process, the expression of students' self-experience, and language activation outside the classroom.

4.1. Target language-based interaction

The frequency of interaction is one of the five defining characteristics of CLT. The term interaction, borrowed from English, refers to mutual engagement or reciprocal communication [10]. In Hungarian language classrooms, the most common form of interaction is group work. Typically, students are divided into several groups, each assigned a task. During the discussion phase, group members exchange ideas related to the task and collaborate on its execution. Finally, the results are presented to the teacher and the rest of the class.

From the perspective of communicative competence development, opportunities for each student to engage in direct communication with peers are crucial. Clearly, the more frequent and meaningful the interaction, the more conducive it is to enhancing cooperative learning outcomes and oral proficiency.

Interview results indicate that the frequency of interaction in Hungarian classes at TFSU is closely related to the course type. In listening and speaking classes, target-language interaction is more frequent, while in grammar and writing courses, instruction tends to be teacher-centered, with minimal student interaction.

Interaction frequency also varies by academic level. Students in higher years generally exhibit greater willingness to engage in class activities than those in lower years. For example, first- and second-year

students at TFSU often fear making mistakes. Many worry about being ridiculed for grammatical errors or omissions and thus avoid active participation. In contrast, third-year students usually spend a year studying in Hungary, immersed in a native-speaking environment. This experience significantly improves their speaking skills and helps them overcome anxiety about errors. As a result, returning students typically demonstrate increased confidence in classroom communication.

Despite these positive developments, several issues regarding classroom interaction emerged from interviews with Hungarian majors at TFSU:

a. During group discussions, especially in the first and second years, some students participate passively. Over half of the interviewees attributed this to fear of making mistakes and potential loss of face. Others cited a lack of learning motivation.

b. Group discussions are frequently conducted in students' native language (Chinese) rather than in the target language (Hungarian), diminishing the opportunities for communicative practice.

c. In many cases, students write out discussion results beforehand and simply read from their notes during presentations, rather than speaking spontaneously. This practice limits the development of real-time speaking skills.

4.2. The use of authentic corpora

One of the core features of CLT is the use of authentic corpora in learning situations. A pedagogical corpus refers to the collection of texts used by students within a given course [11]. When course materials include authentic texts, the pedagogical corpus becomes authentic as well. Such corpora offer several advantages: they allow learners to revisit previously acquired knowledge from new perspectives and to discover grammatical rules or find answers to their questions independently, without teacher intervention. It is widely acknowledged that repetition and the systematization of knowledge are essential in language acquisition. Learners can engage with such corpora in a relatively playful manner. Moreover, authentic corpora are typically aligned with learners' language proficiency levels, allowing for independent use without constant guidance from the teacher [12].

Tasks based on authentic corpora help learners identify frequently used language patterns statistically—whether by level, context, or topic—and reinforce them through repeated exposure. At the same time, such tasks promote learners' reflection on language structure and function. Conscious language analysis is unavoidable during the learning process, and the language classroom is the place where this can and should be encouraged. Written corpora are further complemented by corpora of spoken interactions.

In the context of Hungarian language education at TFSU, pedagogical corpora primarily derive from grammar textbooks, workbooks, and additional materials compiled independently by instructors. These teaching materials fall into two categories: Chinese-authored and Hungarian-authored. The Chinese textbooks currently in use, edited by Professor Gong Kunyu of Beijing Foreign Studies University, consist of three volumes: *Hungarian Language Book I*, *Hungarian Language Book II*, and *Hungarian Language Book III*. The first and second volumes focus on elementary grammar, while the third volume, co-edited with Guo Xiaojing, provides more comprehensive training in language skills and cultural knowledge. The textbooks were published in 1998, 2005, and 2009, respectively.

Given their dates of publication, the texts in these books are relatively outdated and do not fully reflect contemporary Hungarian language use. For instance, terms such as "producer's cooperative" (TSZ,

pronounced té-esz), referring to an agricultural cooperative system that existed in China between 1958 and 1984, still appear in the first volume—highlighting their lack of authenticity and relevance.

In addition to these textbooks, Hungarian courses in Tianjin also incorporate a wide range of materials compiled by native Hungarian teachers, including *MagyarOK*, *Lépésenként magyarul I–II*, the *Hungarolingua* series, *Jó reggelt!*, *Jó napot kívánok!*, and *Jó szórakozást magyarul*, among others. Most interviewed students responded positively to these resources. They noted that the materials employ authentic corpora, closely reflect real-life communication scenarios, and significantly enhance oral communication skills.

Materials independently curated by instructors also form an important part of the classroom corpus, particularly in advanced writing classes and in newspaper and magazine reading modules. Most students expressed a favorable opinion of the authenticity and relevance of these resources. They appreciated that instructors selected timely, diverse, and up-to-date texts, such as the Hungarian Prime Minister's New Year's address, scholarly articles on linguistics, and excerpts from Hungarian literary classics. These materials not only improve language proficiency but also broaden students' understanding of Hungarian society and culture—encompassing politics, economics, science and technology, literature, history, and geography—which is essential for developing true communicative competence.

4.3. Consideration of the learning process

According to Nunan, one of the five key features of CLT is that it encourages students to focus not only on the language itself but also on the learning process. In language instruction, teachers should create opportunities for learners to reflect not only on their acquired language knowledge and skills, but also on how they learn. This involves helping students become aware of their individual learning strengths and weaknesses, understand their preferred learning styles and strategies, and take an active role in managing their own learning process.

However, interview results indicate that in Hungarian language teaching in Tianjin, opportunities for students to reflect on the learning process are largely lacking. Most instructors tend to focus primarily on the explanation and practice of language skills, paying little attention to guiding students in evaluating or improving their learning strategies. Some respondents reported the following: "*In class, the teacher would not point out the mistakes in my learning methods, but would instead focus on teaching and practicing language skills. Teachers generally do not pay much attention to the learning process itself, nor do they attempt to understand the learning styles or strategies of individual students.*"

At TFSU, the assessment of students' Hungarian language proficiency generally relies on classroom quizzes and final examinations. Students typically use these assessments to evaluate their learning outcomes and to identify areas for improvement. It is often only after receiving their test results that they begin to reflect on their weaknesses and adjust their learning strategies accordingly. In summary, students' awareness of the learning process is usually developed post-assessment, when they are able to determine the most effective learning methods based on their individual experiences.

4.4. The expression of students' self-experience

The fourth characteristic of CLT is the emphasis on incorporating learners' personal experiences as meaningful components of classroom learning. For non-bilingual learners, it is often more challenging to

express personal opinions, formulate coherent thoughts, and use tone appropriately in relation to the topic. Therefore, targeted attention to these aspects is essential in the educational process [13]. From this perspective, developing oral communication skills requires promoting opportunities for non-bilingual learners to express their personal experiences during classroom activities.

According to interview findings, the extent to which Hungarian language students at TFSU express their personal experiences in class is closely related to their academic year and language proficiency level.

In the lower grades, oral activities in Hungarian classes typically focus on specific grammatical phenomena. For example, when teaching the use of the suffix *-ul/-ül* and vowel harmony rules, oral classroom practice might involve choosing different language names (e.g., German, French) and performing various derivations. Common topics include self-introduction, nationality, and spoken languages. At this stage, students' grammatical knowledge is limited, and their language proficiency remains at the A1–A2 level. Therefore, most speaking activities are oriented toward reinforcing particular grammar points. To help students quickly grasp these concepts, classroom tasks frequently involve dialogue exercises conducted through group work, role-plays, and other interactive formats.

According to several interviewees, some classroom activities at the lower level do involve the expression of personal experience. These activities often occur when teachers ask familiar questions such as: "*What did you do on the weekend?*" This type of question represents one of the most common forms of personal expression in lower-grade classrooms. As one respondent stated: "*I really like it when teachers ask questions like 'What did you do on the weekend?' in class. It motivates me and encourages me to do meaningful things on weekends so I can share them with the teacher and my classmates.*"

In the upper years of study, as students acquire more comprehensive grammatical knowledge and achieve higher levels of language proficiency, they encounter more opportunities to express personal experiences through classroom activities. Teachers often encourage them to share opinions and participate in group discussions based on topics from the ECL oral examination. The ECL (European Consortium for the Certificate of Attainment in Modern Languages) is a standardized proficiency test aligned with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), assessing listening, reading, writing, and speaking skills across multiple levels. Moreover, students are increasingly invited to discuss current social issues, fostering deeper and more authentic engagement with the target language.

4.5. Language activation outside the classroom

According to David Nunan, the fifth key feature of CLT is the connection between classroom-based language learning and its activation in real-world contexts—namely, transfer. Transfer is a central concept in the communicative approach. It refers to the learner's ability to apply language elements learned in the classroom to natural, real-life communicative situations. To develop this transfer ability, it is first necessary to understand the key differences between classroom environments and the outside world:

a. Real-world communicative situations usually arise from genuine needs, and individuals strive to meet these needs as quickly and efficiently as possible. Such necessities are often absent in classroom settings, which explains why the motivation behind classroom communication is typically weaker.

b. The range of possible communicative situations in the real world is unlimited, whereas classroom interactions are pre-structured and finite.

c. Real-world communication is highly complex and multisensory: it integrates auditory, visual, tactile,

and even olfactory stimuli with emotional components. In contrast, classroom settings often lack this richness and complexity.

The communicative situations constructed in the classroom differ significantly from those encountered in the real world. In everyday life, we rarely ask where the chalk is, yet we frequently inquire about the whereabouts of other objects. The important point is that linguistic structures and communicative intentions are not bound to a specific situation: once mastered, they can be applied across a wide variety of similar contexts.

According to interview data, most Hungarian language students at TFSU hold a positive attitude toward transferring classroom-acquired language skills to real-life situations. They believe that classroom learning provides a solid foundation for effective communication outside the academic setting. For instance, classroom role-play activities often simulate everyday scenarios such as making restaurant reservations, shopping, or traveling. These tasks are typically centered around specific vocabulary and situational dialogues. By mastering the relevant language and practicing these interactions in class, students can enhance their ability to communicate successfully in similar contexts beyond the classroom.

5. Conclusion

The findings of this study demonstrate that CLT has strong potential in improving communicative competence among Hungarian language learners in Chinese universities. In the case of TFSU, students benefit significantly from interaction-focused activities, authentic corpora, and exposure to real-life communication scenarios. However, several barriers limit the full application of CLT principles. These include students' fear of making mistakes, the use of Chinese during group tasks, lack of emphasis on learning strategies, and outdated Chinese-authored textbooks that fail to reflect real Hungarian usage.

To address these issues, Hungarian language instruction in China should prioritize updated, authentic teaching materials, foster a supportive classroom environment that tolerates errors, and emphasize student reflection on learning processes. Teacher training on CLT methodologies and increased collaboration with native instructors are also essential. Future research could include the perspective of instructors and expand the sample size for broader applicability.

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